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Chapter Twenty-three: Angelique XI

Late June, 2031

"Aren't those too many clothes for just a pouch of tobacco and a couple of bottles?"

"Neither liquor nor tobacco comes cheap, Alez. You already knew that."

"Yeah, sure, but this deal isn't fair."

"Hm... what do you suggest?"

"Two pouches of tobacco, and I want six cans of tuna."

"No one would take that deal..."

"Really? I think anyone who took a closer look at these clothes would agree with their eyes shut."

I stepped toward the table in front of me and picked up a sweater at random from the pile scattered across it. I held it by the collar, making a rough show of the fabric's thickness.

"It's not easy to find clothes of this quality out there. This is comfortable and warm. I won't just hand it over. Getting through winter without any heating is easier with clothes this good."

"I'm not denying the quality, but summer's coming. I don't need it now. If

you bring it back in a couple of months..."

"In a couple of months, when you actually need it, I'll ask for several bottles for just one coat. I won't be as generous as I am now."

"You..."

The woman across the table let out a huff, planting her hands on her hips as she muttered a curse in a language I didn't understand.

"Do you have to be so mean?"

"I'm not mean. I'm warning you prices will go up. I wouldn't do that if I were mean."

"Surely you've got more clothes than you could ever wear. Knowing how much we need them here..."

Irena placed another pouch of tobacco and the requested cans on her side of the table.

"It's not personal, Irena. I don't have much else to trade besides these clothes, so I have to squeeze as much out of them as I can. Unless you're interested in books, of course. I've got thousands of those..."

"You're not even a good trader; you just take advantage..."

"So, do we have a deal?"

"Ugh... yeah, yeah, we have a deal."

She took all the clothes I'd brought from the mansion in that old travel bag I'd found rummaging through the rooms. I did my part, stashing the goods I'd acquired in the same bag.

"You didn't take much food today."

"We found a restaurant's storage in the northwest of the city. It was locked, untouched since they evacuated the place."

"Only you guys get that kind of luck."

"Most of it was spoiled. We salvaged what we could, and it turned out to be plenty. We'll have food for a while."

It was a calm mid-morning. The sky was clear, not too hot, and five people had greeted me warmly when I entered the commune. I went straight to Irena's house, a place where I'd traded many times before. It wasn't exactly a deal or an agreement, but whenever I needed to barter, I went to her. If she didn't want what I brought, I'd turn to the other traders.

It's one of the best houses around. Two stories, a pristine white exterior with intricate wooden carvings, and a beautiful front garden. Irena is a woman... how to put it... she maintains this air of high-class elegance despite her limited means. It's admirable, if you ask me.

"Got anything else?"

"Nah, I traveled light today. Got exactly what I needed, so I won't be back for a couple of weeks."

"How's that girl doing?"

"Interested in Angelique?"

"Of course I am. With how careless you are, you probably don't think about these things, but you should get her some nicer clothes to wear. Maybe some makeup or accessories, I've got..."

"I don't think she'd care for that."

"You don't even give her the chance, poor thing..."

I let out a short, dry laugh.

"With all the clothes we have at home, if she really wanted to try something different, she'd do it without asking me. She's practical; she only likes what's comfortable to move in. If you knew her better..."

"But I can't know her better."

"...guess not."

"Why didn't you bring her today?"

"One of her guns jammed during a skirmish we had not long ago. She stayed back to figure out why."

"Skirmish? Oh... I thought I heard

gunshots a couple of days ago. Was that you?"

"Probably. We ran into two bandits near our place. It wasn't a big deal. There've been a lot of bandits lately; we've had to double our patrols and plan a new route."

"You patrol?"

"Twice a week."

Irena's gaze drifted to the nearest window, where the warm glow of a spring morning streamed in. She sighed and turned away. We were in her living room, and behind her stood a cabinet adorned with trinkets and, curiously, rows of books lined up side by side.

"Now I get it..."

"..."

"Was that your real goal?"

"Yeah, it was."

"Why not just say so? Did you think I'd ask for something in return?"

"It's only logical."

I watched her bend down to open a drawer at the bottom of the cabinet; my hands rested on the table.

"You come by here all the time, Alez. I wouldn't charge you for that information."

"Well... thanks."

"Besides."

She turned back to face me, dropping a heavy, hardcover book on the table. The dust it kicked up forced me to squint.

"Besides?"

"I would've told you anyway. I told you, I'm worried about Angelique."

"Angelique..."

"I don't think you're a bad companion for her. It's just... a girl her age... this isn't the life she should be living."

I couldn't say anything, because I felt exactly the same way.

"So... what you want to know is why there's been a sudden spike in activity in the city, right?"

"Yeah. It's not like the place is crawling with people, but looters and bandits are getting more common. It's strange. I'd expect the opposite, so there must be something else..."

"There is something else. Got a cigarette?"

"You smoke?"

"Sometimes."

I pulled a cigarette for each of us from my case and handed her my lighter. Soon, smoke from both our lungs curled toward the ceiling.

"You wouldn't know this, but Kaliningrad turned into—"

"A state-commune."

Irena looked surprised before giving a faint, almost pitying smile.

"Yeah, it was."

"Was?"

"It fell."

A silence settled, broken only by the sound of Irena inhaling from her cigarette, followed by a sigh and a slight click of her tongue.

"I don't know the details, but there was some kind of intervention orchestrated from Moscow. Everything built there was destroyed in a matter of months. If you headed that way today, you'd find the whole area surrounded by Russian soldiers who'd shoot you on sight without asking."

"But... why?"

"How would I know? I only hear what the Amere folks talk about among themselves. It's probably strategic, or

they're reclaiming as much territory as they can, or... I don't know, and it doesn't really matter."

"So, those bandits..."

"They're all people who fled Kaliningrad. We're not immune to the problem either; we've been caught up in a few conflicts because of this. And this is just the first wave. From what we hear from Amere, most of these refugees ended up in Bydgoszcz, Pila, and Lodz. It's chaotic, and it's expected they'll spread across the continent. You can imagine, if they want to head west..."

"They'll almost certainly come through here."

"I'm afraid so. We're talking thousands and thousands of people, Alez. Kaliningrad wasn't just a commune like this one. A state-commune is... on another level. Thousands of people in a commune that functions like a city did before the war. Ioannina, Comrat, Bruges..."

"Sicily."

She turned her head to look at me, nodding slowly, holding the cigarette to her lips.

"Yeah... like Sicily."

"What will you do?"

"Aleksej wants to ask Amere for help. With how things are, it wouldn't be surprising if they sent a team to stay here until things settle down."

"Do you think Amere would go that far to help you?"

"We're an important commune. Well... maybe more so before than now. Let's just say we were the lookout post before Kaliningrad. We passed on all the information we gathered every couple of weeks. I don't know if Amere plans to retake the state-commune, but I doubt they want to lose all their influence in the area. They'll help us."

I clicked my tongue and sighed. The smoke I exhaled clouded my vision for a

moment.

"I guess... that doesn't thrill you much."

Irena said with a slight teasing tone. I don't know what my lack of reaction stirred in her, but she huffed and placed her hands on the table.

"Are you ever going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"What you did before you had that girl with you."

"..."

"I'm not stupid, Alez. From the first time I saw you, I knew you had something to do with Amere."

"I don't—"

"Yes, you do. Were you a Captain? I don't think you were just a soldier. You talk about things with a confidence most of those kids don't even know exist."

"Why do you care so much? It's in the past."

"Alez."

She stubbed her cigarette out on the table and let it fall to the floor, hardly the action I'd expect from someone as refined as Irena.

"Alez, I'm the second most... I'm the most important person in this commune. I don't dislike you, or that girl, but I have a role to fulfill."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"You know exactly what. Alez, if you're... someone important who ended up deserting..."

I saw Irena's chest rise and fall slowly. She stared at me, leaving no room to doubt the gravity of what she was about to say.

"You could be the reason this commune

is reduced to rubble and all its members executed."

I couldn't find words to respond in that moment. I took a drag from my cigarette and looked away, partly intimidated by those brown eyes.

"But that's not something you didn't already know."

"..."

"I don't plan to cut ties with you, Alez. Nor ban you from the commune or turn you over to Amere, but I need to know what I'm dealing with to take the right measures."

"I can't... be sure you won't turn me in."

"I wouldn't."

"Why not?"

When I looked back at Irena, I found a gentle, reassuring smile, the kind a teacher gives her students.

"Because Angelique would suffer for something that isn't even her fault."

I tossed my cigarette to the floor, letting it burn out on its own as I thought of what to say. I took a breath and sighed, watching the ember fade.

"Years ago, before I met Angelique, I was part of Amere. I wasn't... just a soldier. I held a somewhat higher position."

"That's what I figured. How high, Alez?"

"I... I don't know. I'm not sure. I mean, I don't think it was that high, but it was probably important for what I was involved in."

"Stop beating around the bush, please. Be clear. I'm really not against you, Alez."

I don't know when she got so close, but our eyes met when I turned to her.

"Yeah... yeah, I was someone important."

"A Commander?"

"Not exactly. I was... a bodyguard. A protector, a caretaker, whatever you want to call it."

"I'm not following."

"Irena... how much do you know about Amere?"

"Enough."

"About their highest ranks?"

"...Some."

"Do you know... about the regional leaders?"

"..."

"Would you know who I'm talking about if I mention the Ahri?"

"...Yes, Alez. I know about that."

"Then this will be easier than I thought."

"What did you have to do with the Ahri? Bodyguard... don't tell me."

"I was part of his personal guard. His right hand. Wherever the Ahri... wherever Victor went, I was there. If something bothered him, I handled it. If a mission

required precision only his best soldiers could manage... I was one of the chosen. Assassination, sabotage, reconnaissance. You name it, I did it for that... for that man. I never met anyone like him. The Ahri is terrifying. No one else could convince you his methods were the best for his plans. His cruelty— no, I can't even call it cruelty. I couldn't call it cruelty when I could only see it as 'necessary.' His orders were things no outsider could justify, but they sounded so convincing to us. Everything he said was true. Even if we didn't believe it, deep down, we knew he was right."

"Alez..."

"We were mercenaries. It'd be foolish to think we were anything more, but even so, part of us was committed to the cause. How could you not believe him?"

"You left, Alez."

"We went and—"

"You left, Alez."

I felt Irena's hands take my face, forcing

me to look at her. It wasn't her usual confident expression, but the eyes of someone who felt the world would collapse if they didn't act.

"Don't say any more. I don't want to hear more. It's... more than enough."

"Irena..."

"You walked away from Amere. You abandoned them. Even... even if you were in the palm of none other than the Ahri... you're standing here in front of me today. That's all that matters."

"..."

I didn't know what to say.

"Go home, Alez. There's a girl waiting for you."

"..."

"And take this book, it's a gift."

Irena knew far more than she let on. It was obvious. Her reaction to my brief

story was too strong for someone who hadn't seen what the Ahri did firsthand. If she let me go, it was only... for Angelique.

I moved quickly, tucking the book away without looking at the cover and grabbing my bag. Without a goodbye, I headed for the door.

"Alez."

I paused, glancing back at her.

"Alez... that girl depends on you. I don't think... I don't think I need to explain the mess you're in."

"You know I can't stay here."

"I know. But... I'll look after her."

"..."

"I'll protect her and make sure nothing happens to her, so—"

"I'll be back in a couple of weeks."

"Alez..."

I stepped out and closed the door. I knew... I knew what she was going to say. Fuck, I know it now, and it still eats at me. Our little haven lasted far less than I expected. 'Ten years,' how optimistic I was. No, how foolish I was. It was never a good idea to begin with. What was I trying to do? A normal life? Here? In this world? If I can't put her on a plane to the other side of the planet, it's pointless to pretend I can give her a normal life. And I'm not even sure about that, since I have no way of knowing what things are like across the Atlantic. How much time do we have? How long until a group of hundreds settles in the city looking for shelter? We can't defend this place with just the two of us. No, we'd need at least ten people to keep it safe...

Angelique... Is it really time to leave?

Angelique... Can I really be sure there's something better out there for you?

Angelique, the truth is, I don't feel good. I don't know how much longer I can be your shield.

Angelique, I have to do something about it.

Angelique...

. . .

Something's wrong with my body.

I don't know when it started or when it got worse. I've hidden it from Angelique as much as I could. It hasn't been too hard; I've just had to push a little more than I used to, but...

It hurts. My body gives out after just a bit of effort. I get winded quickly when I run, and my arms shake when I hold my gun for too long. It's like... I've lost strength in just a few years. Sometimes I get tired climbing stairs, and sometimes things slip from my hands as if my fingers can't grip properly.

It doesn't happen all the time. Some days I can give my all and barely feel tired, and others, just lifting Angelique leaves me exhausted. She doesn't know. I don't

think she knows. She hasn't noticed yet; I've never shown any sign in front of her.

I'm scared. I don't know how much time I have left, and... I don't know what state I'll end up in. In the worst case, I could become nothing but a burden to Angelique. I can't even imagine reaching that point. Angel is strong; she can fend for herself, but she doesn't have as much experience as I do. Alone out there? I don't know... I don't know how long she'd last, and the thought terrifies me.

I'll do something about it.

. . .

When I got home around noon, I heard the piano playing in the distance. It stopped the moment I closed the door. Seconds later, Angelique appeared at the top of the gallery, one hand on the railing, looking down at me.

"Did you manage to trade?"

"Yeah, I got just what we needed. We'll

be fine for a while. I heard the piano; does that mean you figured out what was wrong with your gun?"

She shook her head and started down the stairs.

"No, I just... got tired."

"It's rare for you to give up so easily."

"I spent hours thinking, but I didn't get anywhere."

"Hm... well, we'll look at it together later."

Finally at my level, she nodded and began rifling through the bag I'd placed on the table.

"Angel..."

"Yeah?"

She spoke without looking at me. She pulled out a glass bottle, checked its contents, and put it back, doing the same

with the other. Then she pulled out the book and gave a small smile as she read the title.

"I got some information."

"Information?"

"About the new bandits roaming the city."

Only then did she turn to me. As if reading my mind, her face took on a faint look of worry.

"It's just the start of something much worse. We're in for... tough months. I say months, but I don't know if this could last years, or if the whole city might change completely."

She didn't say anything, just kept looking into my eyes. I reached into my coat, pulled out two cigarettes, lit mine, and handed her one with my lighter.

"A... commune, a big one, fell. Up north. They're expecting a wave of thousands of people passing through here. They might even settle nearby. If that happens..."

"..."

"The fight for resources will be brutal. The little that's left in the city will be gone in weeks, and the rest will be a constant struggle to survive. What we deal with now won't even compare."

"What are we going to do?"

She didn't really want to hear my answer; I could see it in her dull eyes. I exhaled smoke and leaned a hand on the table. The table we'd moved here ourselves, in the home we'd shaped to our liking.

"I'm... not sure. I figured it'd be something like this, but not on this scale. If it's really going to be like that, staying here isn't a good option."

Her hand holding the cigarette trembled at those last words.

"Where would we go? What place could be better?"

"Maybe south or—"

"We already went south!"

I managed to hide my surprise at her raised voice. Her voice, always almost a whisper. I chewed on the words that came to my mouth; I didn't like what I was saying either.

Her face twisted with anger. It was strange, because it didn't seem directed at me, but born from the utter helplessness of facing an unsolvable problem.

"We'll find a place. Just like this house gave us shelter, there's sure to be another."

"Alez..."

"It makes no sense to argue about this, Angelique."

"What you're suggesting makes no

sense! We traveled the whole continent looking for something better! There are only more bandits and Ameres who'll shoot us without asking!"

"There are countries that haven't completely fallen. If—"

"And they'll reject us! We tried! It happened in Switzerland and Hungary! Where else do you want—"

"Do you think I want to do this?!"

She flinched, startled by my shout. The cigarette fell from her fingers, and she glanced at it but quickly fixed her fierce gaze on me.

"It doesn't seem like you want to find an alternative either!"

"And what's your plan to stay here?"

"Defend ourselves, what else?! Isn't that what we've always done? If someone comes near, we shoot. It's always been that way! Always! Since the day I met you! Why would it be different now?!"

"Idiot! That'll work the first few times! What then? Do you know what'll happen next? When word spreads there's a big mansion with just two, TWO people, with weapons and food? What'll you do when thirty people storm this place at once?"

"No..."

Our shouts echoed through the living room. Nale watched us from the couch, alert.

"No, what?! You don't know?! Of course you don't! Because there'll be nothing left to do!"

"The commune!"

"What about the commune?"

"We can ask them for help! I'm sure Irena—"

"Irena only cares about the commune, Angelique! Don't be so naive!"

"Then let's just join the commune once and for all!"

"Impossible."

"Why is it impossible?! Why is everything impossible?! Why are we forced to live like this?!"

Her voice broke, and I bit my tongue to keep from shouting again. I couldn't tell her. I couldn't explain why I couldn't join the commune. I couldn't. I can't. Especially since... nothing's stopping her from joining. Irena would welcome her with open arms, and as a member of the commune, Aleksej would never consider using her as leverage.

Our breathing was heavy, but the fight wasn't over... and I reached my boiling point at her justified complaints.

"Because that's how it is, Angelique! That's the world! That's—"

As if to prove a point, or like a child trying to win an argument, I turned and strode to the window by the door, flinging it open before looking back at her.

Beyond the window, the same lifeless,

deserted avenue as always.

"That's it! That's the world you live in! And you know it damn well! You know exactly how things are out there!"

I marched toward her and grabbed her wrist, lifting it to her face.

"And you know because you've lived it! You know because you've pulled the trigger hundreds of times! You know—you know because you've stolen, killed, and taken advantage of others like any other bandit out there!"

Her eyes widened at my words, her lips trembled, and she yanked her hand away.

"We're not like them!"

"What's the difference?"

"We...! we..."

Only then did I realize something.

Angelique has always seen us as the good guys. She's always seen... me as the good guy in the story. That way, everything we do is justified. Because we're the good guys. Because we have to survive.

But she's not foolish; she knows reality is more complex.

I'm the fool for not realizing back then that this way of thinking is her defense mechanism, her way of coping with such a harsh reality.

'I want to protect you like you protect me,' she said once. I guess I didn't grasp all the meanings of that phrase.

I'm the one who feeds her, defends her from the bad guys, teaches her to survive, and is always there for her. She just wants to be the same as me; she just wants to be one of the good guys.

"We... don't have a choice."

Her voice broke completely. She didn't take her eyes off me, so I could easily see her tears pooling before she lowered her

head and they hit the floor.

"No one does."

"..."

"That's why we live like this and do what we do."

"..."

"Angelique..."

"I'm..."

She slowly raised her face, and the sight shattered me into a thousand pieces. Angelique wasn't just crying; she was... devastated. There was no anger left in her gaze, only pure, raw, tangible sorrow. It was the kind of crying you let out in the face of the darkest misfortune, the worst disappointment. It was a cry of utter hopelessness. Her hands clutched her chest, as if trying to pull out a dagger lodged in her heart. She looked into my eyes, showing a glint in her blue pearls I didn't want to see, and between sobs, she let out a single sentence that would burn

into me for the rest of my life.

"I'm tired of living like this, Alez."

I was speechless.

I rushed to her and wrapped her in my arms. She didn't return the embrace, just cried and cried against my chest.

All I could think about was apologizing, but it would have been pointless. She wouldn't know exactly what I was apologizing for. She'd think it was for the shouting, when really, I'd be apologizing for not being able to give her a better life, the life she deserves. Because to me, Angelique deserves the whole world, but this world is horrible, unworthy of her. So... I can't offer her more than this little world she lives in, and even that is coming to an end soon.

...

But I know there's more.

I know I can give her more.

Somehow, someway, I can give her something much, much better.

There must be something out there for both of us.

I'll find it. Even if I have to turn this world upside down, destroy it, and rebuild it with my own hands, even if I have to sacrifice every drop of my blood and every inch of my body, I'll find a place where she can live without fear. A place where she never has to pick up a gun again and can read as many books as she wants.

Even if it's the last thing I do, Angelique. Even if... even if I have to...

"Angel?"

She pushed me away with her arms. Not roughly, but with clear frustration. She didn't say a word or look at me, just fled to the second floor. I heard her bedroom door close, and I sighed. I saw both our cigarettes on the floor, half-smoked, but I

didn't feel like picking them up.

I walked to the couch where the cat was still lying and sat beside him. He soon climbed onto my lap and settled to sleep while I stroked his back.

"...It was my fault, Nale. I lost it without thinking about what really hurts her. You should go to her; she needs you more than me."

But the cat just closed his eyes to rest, oblivious to anything but his own concerns. I leaned my head back and stared at the ceiling for a long time.

A long time...

. . .

When I thought I was about to fall asleep, I heard soft footsteps and the creak of the stairs behind me. I didn't turn, assuming Angelique had come down for water or food.

The steps approached and stopped beside the couch.

Angel looked at me with a face slightly less blank than usual, her eyes a bit red. We didn't exchange words; she just sat next to me, as close as she could, and wrapped her arms around my waist, burying her face in my chest. I stroked her head with one hand while petting the cat with the other.

"Everything will be okay, Angelique."

"..."

"We're together."

"..."

"We're together, aren't we?"

"...Yeah."

"That's more than enough. It always has been, and it always will be."

"..."

"Because we'll be together forever, Angelique."

Her embrace softened, as if she were resting against me.

. . .

I'll always be there for Angelique.

Always.

Mais c'était ma faute, pour ne pas avoir essayé de te comprendre.

Sept. 14, 2025, 2:23 a.m. 2 comments

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Pepe Pepito @pepe-pepito-733899 (/en/u/pepe-pepito-733899/)

Overall very very good chapter with high aim for "things to come" to the pair
(i hate leaving comments, because i suck at them, but might as well)

It does feel like the overall intensity has picked up here, both the over-arching one, which at a macro level has been increasing and flexing every other chapter. And on this particular chapter also the micro moved up, however, i will say BSA has a weird feel on the micro particularly because of the way that the story is told; it moves quickly or it literally doesn't, which i guess is kind of the fun part of it, but it does feel weird on the back of the head at times. (first person perspective will do that, so nothing to worry, but its something "feeling" wise that i have personally noted)
(then again i do feel like i am pointing out the obvious lol)

and don't make the young lady cry much please...it tugs on the heart

keep up the good work!

Reply comment · September 1, 2025, 14:18 · (/en/dashboard/story/comment/814531/vote/up/)

Hazo @hazo (/en/u/hazo/)

Yeah I get what you mean, even I notice this. I think it ended up that way, with the micro feeling 'slow' at times, because I wanted to show a bit of their day-by-day over some of the

chapters, which contrasts heavily with the rest of the story.
So yeah I agree it can get weird haha.

Thanks a lot for reading and for leaving a comment! It helps me a lot!

September 14, 2025, 17:40 ♡ (/en/dashboard/story/comment/814629/vote/up/)

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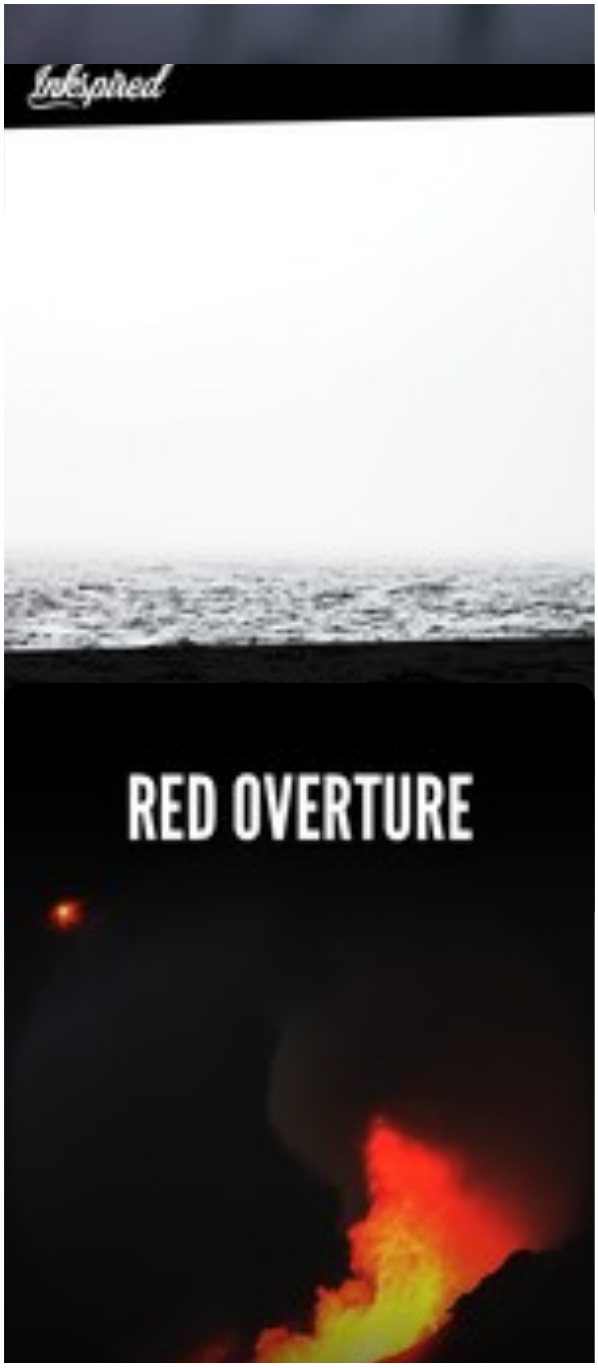

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